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AN EARLY SEVENTEENTH CENTURY ANGLER.¹

THE cynicism of ignorance and indifference probably gave rise to the libel that fishing consisted of "a stick and a string, a worm at one end and a fool at the other." Dr. Samuel Johnson and other writers have been unjustly censured as the authors of this fling, which recently has been traced back to M. Guyet, a French writer of the latter half of the sixteenth century; and he quotes it as an old saying.

The sport has, however, not lacked defenders. Some forty years before Izaak Walton's "Compleat Angler" was published Master John Dennys, of Somerset, the shire of Tom Jones, wrote in quaint and curious verse "The secretes of Angling teaching the Choysest tools bates and seasons for the taking any fish in pond or River practised and opened in three bookes," a poem as artless as the old spelling, capitalization, and absence of punctuation of its title. It is probably the second book in English on this theme, Prof. Arber assigning precedence only to Juliana Barnes's "Fysshyng with an angle," printed as a supplement or appendix to "The manere of hawkyng and huntynge,"¹ issued in 1496. The original edition of Dennys's book, printed in 1613, exists in only two copies; and in 1653 Izaak Walton, referring to it, could not definitely assign the author's name. It was a posthumous child, as printer Roger Jackson tells in his dedication "To the Worthy, and my much respected friend, Master John Harborne, of Tackley in the County of Oxford, Esquire." Our printer, finding the "Secretes" "not only savoring of Art and

¹ It is not a little noteworthy that the first book of the kind should be the work of a woman's hand. Estcourt says: "It is the prototype of all angling books since written, and I am inclined to trace the origin of the title 'gentle' which our art by well-acknowledged right now possesses to the fact that the first angling book known to us was written by a lady, a *gentle* lady; for she was not only of rank, but was prioress of a nunnery and famous for her learning and accomplishments." A bad guess, and not supported by historical evidence.

Honesty, two things now strangers unto many authors," could not refrain from bringing to the attention of the public these pleasant and profitable verses, especially when "matters of no moment pester the stalls of every stationer."² Nor does he apologize for the form, "Angling being as fit for poetry as is Husbandry, and are not Hesiod and Vergil remembered with honor?"

In true classical style Master Dennys introduces his poem with the stilted figures of "singing" and invocation to the Nymphs; but quickly comes at his subject (with merely a side glance at Centaur and Old Boreas) by bidding us hie to the woods, and there with practiced eye seek the hazel, careful to select the shoots straight, long, and round, casting any in excess of two years' growth, careful also to have sufficient store,³ so that only the fittest be always at hand. And for this a word of caution: the brittle breaks, the well-seasoned, pliant rod comes through the fray with the lordly pike unscathed. And glitter frights the fish. So too they should be denuded of their leafy growth at once except the top.⁴ The rod perfected for use, the line demands skill, care, and judgment. Long hairs from the stallion—the mare, the gelding, or old Dobbin will not serve—should be twisted; not hard, not slack, "the mean is sweet," and twined with silver, silk, or gold. The fisher's knot at one end must be just so and so; we must consider what depends⁵ upon it; and the fish is wary. Then the cork, so much as shall suffice for every line to make his swimmer fit; which recalls the story of the problem set the dunce, "How much will a chunk of chalk cost at ten cents a pound?" The cork and quill are, however, an easy matter;

²The Problem Novel or its equivalent must have been the bane of life then as now!

³John Ridd, in "Lorna Doone," reminds us that in cutting out his saplings he took good care to store up enough for emergencies, as fresh-cut spars are not so good as those of a little seasoning, especially if the sap was not gone down at the time of cutting.

⁴In 1653 William Lauson published "Comments" on the poem, of which some are admirable, some ludicrous, and some are anomalies. The rods, he gravely tells us, should be bathed in a furnace a little, that they be lighter, and not top-heavy, "a great fault in a rod."

⁵Not a play upon words.

and some indeed refuse them, eye and hand being as good monitors; but the hooks!—content yourself with nothing but the best. The hooks our poet loves are of such shape as compel him to call up visions of goddesses to do justice to their forms and worth. And neither must they be too short nor yet too long. This patient, pious labor done—

Thus have your rod, line, float, and hook—
The rod to strike, when you shall think it fit;
The line to lead the fish with wary skill;
The float and quill to warn you of the bit;
The hook to hold him by the chap or gill;
Hook, line, and rod all guided to your wit.
Yet there remain of fishing tools to tell,
Some other sorts that you must have as well.

These other fishing tools are: a little board of cypress for the line, a shoe⁶ for worms, and for the fly another box. Also a plummet—to which some object—a ring of lead, tools for emergencies; so shall you not return home with a tale of woe. Among tools, forget not a file (your hooks may need mending) nor a pouch with many pockets. And no fisherman would start without his little *rip* (as the wicker basket for the catch was called); for not only do you expect good sport, but bear in mind the fish must not be bruised. And lastly, with a net, and clad in garments of russet, gray, or other color dark (for you are going to meet a sharper than a Boer, and khaki is the only wear), you stand approved and ready.

An interlude and a moral lesson. The Young Blood raises his shrill voice to deplore the common taste that finds pleasure where the gaming table is not, neither dance, nor wine, nor luxury—in Shakespeare's only meaning of the word. "Deprive yourself of these pleasures to catch a silly fish?" To answer him sundry well-worn figures advance, recite, depart; but a fundamental principle of the useful art of Skipping, remembered from Mr. Anthony Deane, guides us safe-

⁶ A bag or sack. Lauson defines it as worm poke or cloth. The primary meaning is "to cover," from whence the use in this Elizabethan English; but to-day it has only one meaning. Curiously enough, it has no doublet. It is from the same root whence came the widely separated *shade*, *shadow*, *shed*.

ly from the one sleepy section of the poet's work to the pleasant refuge of the oft-told tale of "How this Art of Angling did begin." It is the Ovidian story: how Deucalion and his Pyrrha dear, the lorn souls left after the waters had overwhelmed the earth, approached the goddess's temple to learn how to renew the human race; how they bent their aged bodies to the "saint" as she had now become; how with the obscure words "to take and throw their mother's bones behind their backs" ringing in their ears they passed out of the "church," late the temple of the oracle, to muse upon the saying. A thought: the antiquity of earth as mother! The stones the seas had played with they cast upon the soggy ground—arose inhabitants of our sphere! They increase and multiply so fast, nurtured on the bosom of the chastened parent, that a greater problem soon presents itself: to feed the multitudes. The Malthusian doctrine, with its fine distinctions of weal and bane, was not of that golden, but of our iron age; and Deucalion, guided by unerring instinct, rent from the trees straight boughs, and from their rinds he fashioned lines. From bush and brake he took gnarled twists for hooks; dead frogs and flies and snails and worms his bait—presented the first fisherman!

Our poet's modest nature cares not to do battle with the larger of Neptune's subjects. The whale that swallowed the man of God; the ork, Andromeda's terror; the porpoise, storm's precursor; "the fish that beareth in his snout a ragged sword;" the crocodile, "that weeps when he does wrong;" the halibut, "that hurts the appetite;" these and many others of their ilk he leaves to wander at their ease. His only field is in the Somersetshire rivers, brooks, and pools, "sweet Boyd," and other pleasant places. He tries his skill on the little roach, on the smelt, slender and round, on

The umber sweet, the grayling good of taste,
The wholesome ruff, the barbel not so sound,
The perch and pike, that all the rest do waste,
The bream, the carp, the chub and chavender,
And many more that in fresh waters are.

One of these "many more" is the gudgeon, the best for the

beginner⁷ in the noble art of Angling. He is greedy; the bait, the red worm (and a small one), hook and bait are swallowed, for he has his teeth in his throat, and lives by much sucking. When caught, a dainty morsel! For the roach the bait varies. Sometimes it is the congealed blood of a sheep; sometimes the white wasp, worms, and flies. This is a careless wench and is soon caught, but is one of the meanest.

Her big brother, the carp, gives a different account of himself. He is a mighty one. He strains, and only that the line comes from Bucephalus's mane the great fat worm torn from its mossy bed would have done its duty in vain. The stout rod doubles, and only by the net the day is saved. The foolish dace, weakly allured with a slender wand, compares unfavorably with the ravening trout,⁸ who, though the fly be moved with hand so skillful as to seem alive, yet still is wary; but like the eel at last yields, and from the bottom of the weir and the swift water and the pool comes struggling. In deepest places search for the sewant and the flounder; and sometimes here the shad as well is caught, borne inward by the tide. These are the byplay; the pike is the tug of war. The stoutest rod, the well-approved hook, some living bait, the soundest line for a foot or more protected with wire or thin plating; relax your vigilance but a whit, and defeat will stare you in the face.

⁷Izaak Walton, from our author or from experience, says of the gudgeon: "It is an excellent fish to enter [initiate] a young angler, being easy to be taken." And in the "Merchant of Venice" Gratiano implores Lorenzo:

But fish not with this melancholy bait,
For this fool-gudgeon, this opinion.

⁸The trout of two hundred and fifty years ago is charmingly babbled of by Interpreter Lauson: "The trout makes the angler the most gentlemanly and readiest sport of all other (sic) fishes if you angle with a made fly, with a line twice your rod's length or more, in a plain water, without wood, in a dark, windy day, from midafternoon and have learned the cast of the fly. You must change his color every month, beginning with a dark white and so grow to a yellow. If the wind be rough and so trouble the crest of the water the trout will take the fly in the plain deeps and then and there, commonly, the greatest will rise. When you have hooked him, give him leave! Keeping your line straight. Hold him from the roots and he will tire himself. This is the chief pleasure of angling." Etc. He supplements Denny's baits with some of his own.

But whether the sport be with trout or pike, with dace or gudgeon, with chavender or chub,⁹ whose great delight is in tender cheese or cherries, with perch or tench, with salmon, peel, tweat, or botling, it depends for its highest enjoyment on certain gifts and qualities of mind. The true fisherman must have Faith and Hope and Love and liking for the game. And Patience, "to take mishaps in worth and count them light." With Patience goes Humility, which scorns not to kneel long if need were, to be at constant charge for line and rod, to take the little pain unlooked for which often brings so rich reward. And Strength and Courage he must have, and Liberality, giving plenteous food of needful quality. Without Knowledge his pains go all for naught. With Placidity¹⁰ of mind, content with a reasonable catch or with no sport at all if the weather prove unpropitious; with thanks to God, with Memory for all the needful things before the start, and inured to necessary hardships by Fasting,

And never on his greedy belly think
From rising sun until alow he sink,

in these twelve Virtues as described, we find the shorter catechism of the Angler.

But if the weather be too dry and hot, or else too cold, the waters steel, and hoary frosts on every bough, or blustering winds prevail, or at sheep-shearing time when the savor of the wool pollutes the stream, or when spring floods make mud of erewhile crystal water, or when autumn's scattered spoils lie thick,

To Angle then I think it ill.

Each fish's haunt to know is a prime requisite. Carp, eel, and tench, strange trio, love the muddy ground; carp in the deepest places under hollow roots, the eel and tench among thick weeds. In "places full of fry" the pike abides; in smaller brooks the trout, where deep he hides his head. Shallow spots delight the bullhead. Gravel and sand the ruff and bar-

⁹ Dennys does not use these words as signifying one and the same fish. Lauson so indicates them, probably following Walton.

¹⁰ "Placability" in Dennys, literally *easily appeased*; one of the few infelicities in the poem. "Unruffled calmness" is the sense of the passage.

bel shun; find them in leafy covert. In swiftest waters sports
the chavender; in brackish, shad and tweat and mullet.

But here experience doth my skill exceed,
Since divers countries divers rivers have;
And divers rivers change of waters breed,
And change of waters sundry fish doth crave,
And sundry fish in divers places feed,
As best doth like them, in the liquid wave.
So that by use and practice may be known
More than by art or skill can well be shown.

So then it shall be needless to declare
What sundry kinds there lie in secret store;
And where they do resort, and what they are,
That may be still discovered more and more.
Let him that list, no pain or travail spare
To seek them out as I have done before;
And then it shall not discontent his mind
New choice of place and change of game to find.

Dennys is indeed the Laureate of Angling. Almost alone among the writers of ancient and of modern times he stands manfully for the harmless sport. From Plutarch to Byron contumely and sarcasm are meted out to the craft. The author of the "Lives" thought it a filthy, base, illiberal employment, void of wit nor worth the labor. And in "Don Juan" is the well-known stanza:

And angling, too, that solitary vice,
Whatever Izaak Walton says or sings;
The quaint, old, cruel coxcomb, in his gullet
Should have a hook, and a small trout to pull it.

The Elizabethans as a rule ridicule the art, as Epiton in Lilly's "Endymion," twenty years before Dennys, replying to Samias, who asks him how he will live, replies: "By angling. O 'tis a stately occupation to stand foure houres in a colde morning and to have his nose bitten with frost before his baite be mumbled with a fish."

Shakespeare's allusions are for the most part metaphorical. His direct words are as few as his expressions regarding hope as a virtue and as a guide in conduct. Still to him

The pleasantest angling is to see the fish
Cut with her golden oars the silver stream,
And greedily devour the treacherous bait.

Fletcher's "Faithful Shepherdess" surely came from the closet rather than from the flowery mead containing

And when the weather
Serves to angle in the brook,
I will bring a silver hook
With a line of finest silk
And a rod as white as milk,
To deceive the little fish.

It is safe to say that the glitter of the silver and the shimmer of the milk-white rod would be long "deceiving" any finny denizen outside of the poet's brains.

Mystical Dr. Donne would

Let others freez with angling reeds
And cut their legges with shels and weeds,
Or treacherously poore fish beset
With strangling snare or windowie net;
Let coarse, bold hands from shiny nest
The bedded fish in banks out-wrest,
Or curious traitors sleave silk flies
Bewitch poore fishes wandring eyes.

But there is a balm in Gilead and good in all things, for a mild and proper devotee in the year of grace 1664

While he angled in a brook
A dead man's *skull* by chance hung on his hook;
The pious man in pity did it take
To bury it, a grave with's hand did make;
And as he digg'd, found gold. Thus, to good men,
Good turns to good turns are repay'd again.

What has been may be still. Even though our hook-and-line man of to-day find no skull, and hence no gold, he may, with omniscient Robert Burton, "consider the variety of baits for all seasons, and pretty devices which our anglers have invented, peculiar lines, false flies, several sleights, etc. And if so bee the Angler catch no Fish, yet he hath a wholesome walke to the Brooke-side, pleasant shade, by the sweet silver streames; he hath good aire and sweet smels of fine fresh meadow flowers, hee heares the melodious harmony of Birds, he sees the Swannes, herons, ducks, water-hens, cootes, and many other fowle, with their brood, which hee thinketh better than the noise of hounds or blast of hornes, and all the sport that they can make;" and he may perchance remember the author of the "Secretes." RALPH LYTTON BOWER.